

# On the Swamp Road.

by WILL PAYNE  
Illustrated by J.G. Stephenson

## The Story of an Adventurous Reporter on the Trail of a Murderer

**T**HE farmhouse had never been painted and was now black with age. To keep out the winter cold, it was banked with dirt about the base. At one corner the spring rains, pouring down from a broken eaves trough, had washed away the dirt, embankment, disclosing the rotten ends of the perpendicular siding boards. At the other corner of the north front was a snarled honeysuckle vine, two-thirds dead. Its spreading branches, leafless or bearing only scant and sickly verdure, clung to the warped sideboards like the gaunt arms of an old man embracing the ruined house. One grimy pane was broken out of the window in the west gable and the hole had been stuffed with rags.

For a long time debt and drink and sin had blotted this place, and now there was something else. Under the hot morning sun three women and two children stood in the doorway, visibly huddled together, blanched and agape. They stared now at the house, now at the two empty automobiles standing by the roadside—one of them a long, gray passenger car, the other a red two-passenger roadster. Sometimes, with an excess of horror, they looked over at a skinny old crone who hopped in low gear, churned through the screen of overhanging bushes at the curve and almost immediately stopped the car, every nerve in his body tingling.

A rod ahead of him the road was blocked by an automobile with the top up. The back of the car was scratched and the top torn in half a dozen places. Gaping at this apparition, Skinner's first thought—when he had a weapon. His second thought, which came fast on the heels of the first, was to shift the driving lever into reverse position for backing. He was doing that when a man stepped out of the bushes and laid a right hand on the footboard of the car that was in the self-starter. It churred and the engine whirred, but no explosion came. He tried it again with the same result. Mechanically, he looked again at lever, spark, magnetic key and at other equipment.

Then he saw, with astonishment, that the gasoline dial showed plainly that the tank was empty. Through his brain flitted the surprised and contemptuous thought, "Here's a man running for his life with an empty tank and not knowing it!" He was about to call out, with a touch of indignation, "Why, you're out of juice!"

He was a burly person, with broad shoulders and a deep chest. Although he wore a loose, faded gray coat, one might see that his waist—encircled by a rusty leather belt that held up his frayed trousers—was smaller than his chest. He had lean loins and in comparison with the mighty chest the legs looked almost spindling. His collarless calico shirt was open at the throat, showing a hairy chest and the base of a thick neck.

In other circumstances Skinner might have admired his figure and guessed that he was a prize fighter. Just now he could see scarcely anything except the man's face a foot from his own. It was a swarthy, bald-faced head, the features angular, springing from the car eyes that glittered into Skinner's and on the lips that made a straight line which was bisected by a diagonal white scar. That diagonal scar across the long, straight line of the lips seemed to belong to the face like a natural feature of it.

"All right," said the man grimly, and together they started up the road to the red car.

But Skinner walked ahead and so crossed over to the right-hand side of the road. Thus when they turned behind the car to lift it he would be at the man's left and his right would be at the man's left. He reached up and picked a thread of black cloth from a broken branch. Plainly the top of the car had been up and the collision with the tree had torn it.

"Plumb around!" she demanded. "I'll show 'em to y'. This way! This way!" Her weazened hand clutched at his coat sleeve and she nodded her head old at him.

Skinner thought of an unclean old bird as she bobbed along the roadside—keeping a little in advance of him in her feebile eagerness. At the lilac thicket she halted, stooping and pointing her lean arm and extended index finger in a rigid line. The tracks of an automobile showed plainly on the grass there. At a glance Skinner saw that a machine had drawn up in the cover of the lilac thicket, then backed away to turn around.

"I've turned it around," said the crone, her beady eyes snapping at Skinner. "See here!" Stooping, with her arms and forefinger extended, she pointed to the curving track which the machine had made in backing and turning.

"Backed plumb into that!" she said, triumphantly, and even before she pointed to them, Skinner noticed that twigs and branches of the young tree were broken. He reached up and picked a thread of black cloth from a broken branch. Plainly the top of the car had been up and the collision with the tree had torn it.

"Plumb around!" she said, and swung her skinny old arms in a half circle, as though she were swinging the car around. "Plumb around!" she repeated, repeating the gesture also. Skinner found it peculiarly gruesome.

"I see," he murmured and started abruptly across the road toward his car.

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**I**N following the long gray car out from town he had taken most of the curves on two wheels at risk of his neck. Even now, after ten minutes spent in the farmhouse, the deed had only just accomplished itself. It was so recent that it still oozed and quivered under the bright morning sun.

That came to him as he drove away, and he shuddered. Partly from a mere instinct of flight, he jammed his foot savagely against the accelerator. But there was a professional reason for such, too; and the little old man leaped away his shocked brain began composing the story as it would appear in the extra. It would be the first extra Allentown had ever experienced, and he wondered how much of a hit that metropolitan touch would make.

A wiry and undersized man was Skinner, tanned a good leathery brown. There were few gray hairs in his bristling, intractable mustache, and his gray eyes studied the back-reeling road through a pair of round, gold-bowed spectacles. A faded cloth hat was jammed down on his solid head. He wore a limp shirt, with a rusty little tie under the limp turn-down collar, and an office-stained alpaca jacket over that. Manifold adventures had enriched him little, except in experience; but as usual he was quite boyishly eager over his new adventure of the Allentown Gazette.

A quick side glance showed that the speedometer was registering thirty-five miles an hour, and when he looked back to the road two galloping horsemen had popped up out of the ground. He recognized the grizzly-bearded one on the left and nodded, as he flashed past—with a grim little smile, for the man was carrying a repeating shotgun, and Skinner approved of that. Under certain circumstances buckshot was very effective.

Two minutes later he slowed up with a frown. Coming out, he had simply trailed the gray car over an unknown road. He knew the general direction, of course, but just ahead the road branched to the left. Should he turn there? By general direction it ought to be his way. There was no one in sight to ask; but, in any event, it could hardly take him far out. He swung into the left

branch and jammed down the accelerator again. It was very good going until he passed a small white farmhouse; then the gravel ceased and it became a dirt road.

A few minutes the ground sloped down and the dirt road resolved itself into a rutty wagon track. The road grew worse. Overhanging bushes on both sides lashed the churning car. The heat and the dank smell became stronger. Obviously, he was in a swamp. Now and then through the bushes, in fact, he could see where a ditch had been run on both sides of the road in some long abandoned attempt at drainage, and it was impossible to turn here. The prospect of breaking up a mile through that tortuous rutty road was not inviting. He pushed on, hoping to come either to a better road or at least into a space where he could turn around. So far the road had been dry and baked hard as iron. Now it dropped into lush ground that yielded sponginly and with a squishy sound under the wheels. Three rods ahead the miserable road curved out of sight beneath overhanging bushes.

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**W**ITH a bitter thought that the road couldn't be worse, he shifted into low gear, churned through the screen of overhanging bushes at the curve and almost immediately stopped the car, every nerve in his body protruding from frayed breeches that tailed by some inches to reach his knobby knees. His mouth was open as though it had been frozen that way.

Coming out of the house, Skinner noticed this gaping boy first of all. In his rapid walk toward the red automobile he even looked around and noticed a bony horse standing with his head over the rickety barnyard fence and looking on as though he, too, were speculating upon what had happened. Then he saw the skinny crone behind his machine, watching him with snappy little eyes—as ready and nervous as those of a rat—and he apprehended at once that she burned with a gruesome excitement. Her snappy eyes watched his advance moment, then she darted at him.

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**H**AVING put that little space between himself and the man, he paused with his hand on the open foredoor to add sociably, "I'm driving through from Indiana. Old woman at a log cabin back there told me to take the first turn to the left. Guess she thought she'd play a trick on me. Rottenest road I ever saw in my life.

"It's rotten luck, too," Skinner complained. "Rotten luck." He stepped down to the weedy roadside, and continued: "I wanted to make a place I call Allentown by half past 8, sure. I'd like to bring that old scared neck for sending me off here."

He was, of course, merely fighting for time and trying to think up something. "Your car break down?" he asked his neighbor as he stepped over in front of the man and looked mildly up into his swarthy face.

By contrast his stature seemed that of a boy. As he looked into the sinister eyes, where a peculiar meaning lay, he felt to his marrow that there was going to be no delay, and he was inspired to say, with a confidential little smile and nod, "Fact is, I got into some trouble last night; been driving like the devil ever since 10 o'clock. I guess they're after me." He thought the man's eyes wavered with a slight scowl. "Know anything about a car?" he asked.

"You bet I do," Skinner asserted confidently. "I was in that business once."

"If you git my car to goin'," said the man in his peculiar manner of speaking, which was like a curse, you can follow me out in your car." It was an offer—promise, whatever that might be good for.

"Sure!" said Skinner cheerfully; "Let's have a look at it." And lifting

the hood to look at the engine he continued: "Mighty good car, too. I know it like a book. Used to have the agency for it. Trouble is, it's too high-priced for farmers."

And he rattled on while his hands fussed pointlessly with spark plug and carburetor.

He must gain all the time he could—but not push it a second too far—for the minutes in which this man might hope to escape were running out. So far as his science knowledge went the engine seemed sound.

"Look here, old man. Let's give her a try," he said, shutting the hood.

Starting the stalled car might be as bad for him as failing to start it. He had a laudable notion that once there was a clear way out of the swamp only one of them would ever take it. But he must do something.

By way of answer the man only gave a grim little nod and pulled a nickel-plated watch out of the small pocket in his frayed trousers, consulting it while Skinner's heart seemed to fade out of his body.

Returning the watch to the pocket, the man looked at him—giving him, perhaps, three minutes; or was it only one?

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**S**KINNER climbed into the driver's seat. The man was about to follow him, but changed his mind and took a seat in the tonneau instead—that is, behind him.

With a dull, mechanical eye Skinner looked at the man and the road. "You're pretty particular about that," the man said.

"You're pretty particular about that gun," Skinner replied, with a little nod.

The man asked another question, his eyes boring into Skinner's head: "You come along that road?" He pointed south.

"Sure!" Skinner replied promptly.

"See anybody?" asked the man.

"Not a soul," said Skinner, "except the old woman at the log cabin that I told you about. She told me to turn here. You come with me and we'll make Flatburg."

"All right," said the man grimly, and Skinner's constricted heart expanded exultantly.

Together they stooped to lift, and behind them—almost in their ears, it seemed—voice shouted, "Hello!"

With the marvelous swiftness of a pouncing cat the man glanced over his shoulder, hurled Skinner to the ground, caught him by the throat and drew the hammer. It all happened while the shout was still ringing in Skinner's ears. He lay perfectly still, looking up through his gold-bowed spectacles at the burly form of death which knelt over him. He was not struggling in the least, either physically or mentally; but lying in a kind of quiet wonder, as though the mechanism of his life had been abruptly shut off, awaiting the blow. He saw that the man had turned his head again to look in the direction of the sound and noted the swelling vein on his thick neck.

Then another voice, some distance away, answered, "Hello, there!" The hand at Skinner's throat sensibly relaxed and the arrested mechanism started up again.

"Here's the track of a car!" called the first voice. "Hurry back to Tatroe's and telephone to watch the other end of this road. Then come back here. We'll follow the road through."

"I guess they're after me," Skinner whispered at random.

The man paid no attention to that. With one heavy hand resting on Skinner's chest at the base of the throat, he stretched his thick neck, turning his head from side to side, trying to make out, the person who had shouted.

"I can't see," he growled under his breath, looking down at the prostrate man.

"Stand up," Skinner suggested in a whisper.

The man glowered dubiously down at him an instant and it seemed that the pupils of his eyes contracted.

"I killed three this morning," the man growled. "I'd as lief kill you as look at you." With that he got on his haunches and slowly raised himself, stretching his neck and peering. When he was upright he glowered down and motioned Skinner to rise. Two or three yards brought them to a place where, above the intervening bushes, Skinner could see the head and gray slouch hat of his grizzled bearded friend.

"See here," he said, himself smearing the hat-crown against his arm, "we've got to make sure he does get off the horse, you see. He might just jump out with his gun and poke the hat off my face. Or he might wait till the other man comes back. We've got to make sure he gets off the horse," he repeated earnestly; "we must scatter something around for him to get off and look at."

The man nodded and drew a jackknife from his pocket. Skinner stupidly held out his arm and wondered how much blood-poisoning there might be in the blade which the man drew across it. He stared down at the red streak which broadened on his tanned arm, while the man caught the cloth hat from his head and dabbed the crown with red.

Skinner took the hat, without bothering to put it on, and as he did so something that had been lying in reserve in his brain recurred to him in a flash.

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Twice again Skinner groaned and again the horseman nearer at hand, called, "Hello, there!"

Another groan, an interval of silence, then the voice asked, "Are

"Have y' seen the tracks?" she demanded. "I'll show 'em to y'. This way! This way!"

**A**s the man looked at Skinner at instant his glittering eyes seemed to beat in so that Skinner could fairly feel their impact upon his nerves. "What makes you think somebody's looking for me?" he asked.

"You're pretty particular about that gun," Skinner replied, with a little nod.

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